

Contra Dancing in Kentucky

Couples join together in long lines, moving through geometric patterns with other couples, taking hands with old friends and new acquaintances, smiling and laughing as they go. The music of a live band lifts their spirits and their feet and keeps them going through an energetic ten- or fifteen-minute dance. After an hour and a half, the band plays a couples' waltz and it is time for a break and some potluck refreshments, and then back to another hour or more of dancing. The evening concludes with a last waltz. This is contra dancing, a kind of **recreational dance** that has its roots in the seventeenth century and is very much alive in towns and cities across the United States and around the world. In Berea, Lexington, and Louisville, Kentucky, and Cincinnati, Ohio, contra dances are held once or twice monthly, attracting dancers from all four cities and from other states. Contra dance communities are an example of a folk group. A folk group is a group of people who share a sense of identity and artistic expression through recreation, occupation, family, ethnicity, or belief.

The official part of a contra dance evening lasts about three hours, from eight to eleven p.m. It is often preceded by a potluck supper and followed by late-night dancing at the home of one of the dancers. Whereas historically a contra dance was a social event for a local community, today a community has developed around contra dancing. This community is not just local but extends across the state and even nationally and internationally. Contra dancers are passionate about this kind of dancing. As dancer Steve Bennett says, "The world of dance has been at the center of the very best things in my life!"

Background

Around 1600, country dancing began to become popular in Europe. In country dancing, groups, or sets, of dancers were arranged in circles, squares of four couples, or long lines for three or more couples. These dances became more and more popular during the next two hundred years, taking on characteristics of dance from England, Scotland, France, and other European countries. There are many theories about the name “contra dance.” Some believe that “contra” is simply a mispronunciation of the word “country.” Others believe it came from the original meaning of the prefix “contra” meaning “against,” which may refer to two ideas. First, the two long lines may be seen to be danced “against” each other. Second, the group form and lively energy of country dances contrasted with the stately couple minuets danced during the earlier part of the evening. This kind of group dancing became fashionable during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the same time that democracy began to develop in Europe and the United States. The popular dance form reflected the growing desire for self-government and helped to encourage its development.

People from the British Isles immigrating to new colonies brought this kind of recreational dancing with them. These dances were widely popular during the **colonial period**, taught by dancing masters in towns of all sizes. Over time, country dancing began to take on different styles in different parts of the country. In the northeastern United States, contra dancing in two long lines continued to be popular. At the same time, other forms of group dances developed elsewhere in the country, like the big circle old-time square dance of southern Appalachia and the southeastern United States. Contra

dancing and southern square dancing have similar social contexts. Just as square dancing was a home-based recreation in the south, contra dancing took place in homes in communities in New England. The New England get-togethers were known as “junkets,” or “kitchen junkets,” because furniture was removed from the spacious kitchens to make room for dancing. In the northeast as in the south, participants often danced to the music of a single fiddler. Dances might be occasions in themselves, or they might be associated with cooperative “workings,” such as barn-raisings or corn-shuckings. Sometimes New England dances were held in public places like grange halls, and in these cases a group of musicians played.

By the late 1800s, contra dancing had been replaced in most parts of the country by popular couples’ dances like the waltz and polka, but they continued in some New England towns. In one New Hampshire town, contra dancing continued in an unbroken tradition for two hundred years, into the mid-twentieth century. Though it had become less popular, contra dancing experienced a series of revivals. In the early 1900s, an interest arose in preserving the dance and music of the past. People from urban, industrialized areas wanted to connect with a simpler, rural past. In New England, as in the Appalachian region, dance descriptions were collected. Industrialist Henry Ford had a special interest in staving off what he saw as the “unwholesome” effects of the jazz era. In 1926, he published a book of dance directions, including contra dances, prepared by Benjamin Lovett and entitled, *Good Morning: After a Sleep of Twenty-five years, Old-fashioned dancing is being revived by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Ford*. Ralph Page and Beth

Tolman helped to preserve traditional New England contra dancing by publishing *The Country Dance Book* in 1937.

The square dance revival of the 1940s and 1950s resulted in a spurt of interest in contra dancing, and with the folk music revival of the 1960s and 1970s, interest in the traditional music and dances of New England became even stronger. People traveled from elsewhere to attend the New England dances, and some moved to New England to be closer to the traditions and to the rural or small-town lifestyle that went with it. Contra dancing, in a sense, **immigrated to Kentucky**. By the 1970s, contra dancing was introduced to parts of the country outside of New England, brought by dancers who moved there and by musicians playing at folk dance camps. Two dance camps in Kentucky are Christmas Country Dance School, held annually since 1937 at Berea College, and Cumberland Dance Week, sponsored by the Lloyd Shaw Foundation. Today, contra dancing is an international phenomenon. The Country Dance and Song Society, a national organization devoted to the celebrating and preserving traditional English and Anglo-American dance, music, and song, now has at least 800 country dance groups and 15,000 members all over the United States. Contra dancing is popular in other countries as well, like Belgium, Denmark, and Japan. New dances are choreographed all the time, so that now hundreds of contra dances exist. Well-known callers produce books of dance directions, and bands produce albums of dance music. New dances and music are produced in Kentucky and elsewhere. For example, Lexington dancer Cary Ravitz creates contra dances, and Berea fiddler Al White has written numerous popular contra dance tunes and produced an album with his band, the Berea Castoffs.

Contra Dance Structure and Terms

Contra dances are **structured** as a group dance, in which each couple greets and dances with each of the other couples in the long line, or **set**. Each dance begins by taking **“hands four.”** Each pair of two couples joins hands in a circle of four to prepare to dance. Dances are composed by linking standard moves or **“figures”** together in a sequence that is interesting and fun for the dancers. Four dancers may make a **“star,”** by joining right hands and walking in their own little circle. People weave around each other in a figure-eight pattern called a **“hey,”** or two women reach across the set to take right hands for a **“ladies chain,”** pulling past each other to the men who turn them around with a **“courtesy turn”** and send them back into the set. In **“long lines go forward and back,”** everyone joins hands in a long line with the people on their side of the set. They take four steps toward their partners in the other line, and then four steps back. Swinging is often a highlight of a contra dance. In a **swing**, the couple usually grasps each other in a ballroom hold and spins together for as many as 16 counts. After dancing with one couple for, usually, a 32-count sequence called a phrase, each couple **progresses** to dance with the next couple in line.

Both new and experienced dancers say that the clear **structure** of the dances provides a comfort level so that everyone can succeed. Dancer Sally Bown says, “We all need to feel like we have a safe, nurturing place to go where no one judges us based on gender, appearance, race, profession, age . . . a safe place where we can hug our fellow human beings, where we can learn new skills without feeling foolish, where we, both young folks and adults, can just come and BE. The contra dance community is such a place.” The structure of the dances help to communicate this security.

All of the patterns of a dance are taught by the caller before the dance begins, so even brand-new dancers can participate. Everyone walks through the patterns once or twice without music. When the music begins, the caller verbally **cues** the patterns at first, but quickly the dancers are on their own, synchronizing their movements with the music, their partners, and the whole group. The predictability of the sequences allows for personal expression and **improvisation**, as long as everyone is at the right place at the right time for the next swing, star, ladies chain, or other move.

Significance, Beliefs, and Values

While the **purpose** of contra dancing is **recreational**, the dancing **reflects the beliefs** of the dancers. Dancers say this is a way to create their own entertainment, rather than watch a movie or concert, and it is more fun than going to the gym to get exercise.

Dancers Susan and Jim Vogt say that many other dancers share their values: live a simple life, care for others, avoid status consciousness, and respect diversity.

Contra dancing has **value and significance in the dancers' daily lives**. Dancers form lasting friendships on the dance floor. Many speak of the **community** they have found in contra dancing, Teresa Cole said that in contra dancing, she found a “new tribe to belong to.” Sally Bown describes “the genuine welcome to new dancers, the eagerness to help teach newbies, the patience, the unconditional generosity of everyone.” She says, “Contra dance, to me, means ‘community,’ and my definition of community is very simple.

Community is about the deep people connections, the sharing of the simple, yet profoundly satisfying things in life: conversation, touch, music, movement, food, home,

and heart ... the basics of life.” The **structure** and **movements** of contra dancing help to **express these feelings and beliefs**. Everyone is equal and each person takes hands with each other person in the set, and looks into their eyes with friendliness and trust.

Sometimes dancers become callers or musicians or leaders within their dance communities, providing both self-affirmation and a chance to serve others. “The opportunity to share in the leadership of the group has stretched my experience in ways that affect my entire life,” according to Steve Bennett. Teresa Cole states, “I always understood that dancing was a great way to share yourself with others. I’ve become an avid and loyal organizer in my town, hoping to provide a venue for the positive changes contra dance helped me to make in my own life.” The community reaches beyond the dance floor. Every contra dance community has stories that demonstrate this. When a caller and dance writer in John Brockman’s community had leukemia, the group met and arranged for him to live with one family, while dozens of other contra dancers took turns caring for him and keeping him company, day and night. The community still performs his dances and will never forget him.

Music and Good Dancing

Live music is an important part of contra dancing. Bands almost always include a fiddler and two or more other musicians. The Berea Castoffs include a bass player, a percussionist, and a piano player in addition to the fiddler. The songs are often jigs or reels, and tunes may be described as “smooth,” “driving,” “bouncy,” or “marching.” It may be traditional New England or Appalachian music, or music with Celtic or French-

Canadian roots, or it may have been written recently. Tunes are chosen to match the feel or moves of a particular dance, to support the phrasing of the dance and to energize the dancers.

Dances are most often composed in phrases of four, eight, or sixteen counts. A phrase is a sequence of music or dance that is like a sentence, with a beginning, middle, and end. As dancers become more experienced, they become sensitive to the phrases of the music.

Good contra dancers are able to time their movements to the beginnings and endings of the phrases. Dorothea Hast described “the sense of community that can arise on the contra dance floor as participants together gain **fluency** in their repeated movements and may experience transcendent feelings of mastery, fluidity, freedom, or euphoria.”

(Herman, 8) Callers and musicians help to enhance the flow and excitement of this group experience.

Susan and Jim Vogt describe the “thrill of many people moving in harmony and the vibrancy of the music.”

Besides being aware of the musical phrase, and able to move fluidly, good contra dancers are always **aware of their partners and the other dancers**. **Eye contact** with other dancers is an important means of **communication**, and firm, friendly handholds and swings tell your partners you are truly connected with them in the dance. Good dancers may add their own personal style to the dancing, always making sure to be ready to flow into the next move at the right time. **Use of the elements of space and time** are key to success as a contra dancer. **Appropriate behavior** at a contra dance requires that each dancer thanks his or her partner at the end of the dance, and then moves on to choose

another partner. Men and women both invite people to dance with them. It is the custom to change partners for every dance, making the atmosphere of a contra dance friendly and welcoming.

Contradance Kentucky! Weekend

The dance weekend presented in conjunction with the Kentucky Folklife Festival is typical of contra dance weekends, hosted by a local dance community and attracting participants from great distances. “Dance gypsies” love to dance so much that they may attend dance weekends two or more times a month, sometimes staying with friends they have met through the dancing in the hosting community. A typical dance weekend includes contra dancing on Friday and Saturday nights, with workshops during the day on Saturday in other kinds of dance such as waltz, swing, salsa, and even belly-dancing. Sometimes the dancing continues into Sunday with waltzing or contra dancing.

Contradance Kentucky! is a collaboration among four Kentucky contra dance communities: Louisville Country Dancers, Lexington Traditional Dance Association, Cincinnati Country Dancers, and Berea’s Contraire Dance Association. Like other dance communities, each of these groups hosts their own weekends each year. They have come together over a period of almost a year to develop a weekend that celebrates their mutual contra dance community, draws experienced dancers from several states, and welcomes newcomers to the dancing they love. The program includes internationally known musicians and dance callers such as Airdance, Kathy Anderson, and Darlene Underwood, and some of the best musicians and callers from across the region.

Clint Cummins likes to say that contra dance provides the “Five basic mood groups: Fun, Fiddles, Fitness, Friendships, and Flirtation.” Sally Bown believes that with contra dancing, she has found the “secret to happiness,” which is the “deep rudimentary contentment missing in many people’s lives.” Kenneth Shepherd echoes the sentiments of many when he says, “I can think of no other activity in our society where people of all ages get together in the same room and share the same activity with so much fun and gusto. I believe this world would be ever so much better if more people contra danced!”

Kentucky Core Content for Assessment

At the Kentucky Folklife Festival, teachers and students, primary through high school, will meet Arts and Humanities Core Content Standards in Dance. Many concepts have been highlighted in **bold** in this article. In addition, at the Kentucky Folklife Festival, with the contra dancers, you will **perform traditional folk dances** and **dances that had their origins in the Colonial American period.**

Analysis of Dance Elements in Contra Dance

Space:

- Level – mostly middle
- Direction – mostly forward
- Reach space – mid
- Formations – couples, long lines, lines of four, circles of four
- Pathways - curving, some straight

Time:

- Pulse - steady, usually one step per beat
- Tempo – brisk walking
- Phrase – 4, 8, or 16 counts
- Accents – sometimes stamps of feet on the “1” count

Force:

- Smooth, even flow, accented by strong stamps of feet
- Firm handholds (somewhat strong, but responding to partner)
- High energy

Body:

- Hands, eyes, feet are emphasized

Many thanks to the dancers from Kentucky and Ohio who shared their thoughts:

Steven Bennett

Sally Bown

John Brockman

Teresa Cole

Clint Cummins

Kenneth Shepherd

Susan and Jim Vogt

Contact Information for contra dance groups:

Contraire Dance Association
Bereacontradance@gmail.com

Cincinnati Contra Dancers
www.cincinnaticontradancers.org
 cincinnaticontradancers@gmail.com

Lexington Traditional Dance Association
www.ltda.ws

Louisville Country Dancers
<http://Louisvillecontradancers.org>

Organizations for purchase of materials and for further information:

Country Dance and Song Society
 132 Main Street. PO Box 338
 Haydenville, MA 01039-0338
 413-268-7426 www.cdss.org

Lloyd Shaw Foundation
 2924 Hickory Court
 Manhattan, KS 66503
www.lloydshaw.org

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